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XXIX.—*Life amongst the Veyes.* By H. C. CRESWICK, ESQ.

[Read December 10th, 1867.]

THE geographical limits of the Vey country might be described to be: on the north, the river Gallinas and country of the same name; Little Cape Mount River, Liberian coast, to the south; the sea-beach on the west; and by the Gola and the Dey territories on the east. It is difficult to say exactly how far interior the dominion of the Vey people extends; I estimate it at from eighty to a hundred and twenty miles—an estimate which, I believe, is not far from the truth.

That this tribe has not always occupied a position on the beach is pretty evident, from the dissimilarity between their *physique* and that of their neighbours, as well as difference in language; besides which they have preserved amongst them a legend that indicates their origin to have been in or near the Mani country. This legend I shall give as I heard it from the mouth of an old chief, translating the native language as literally as respect to the sense will permit me.

Though the advantages of being on the seaboard for the purposes of trade doubtless induced most of the tribes now occupying those positions to come down from the interior, this, I believe, was not the cause of the Vey exodus from their paternal home. As our readers will learn, they were *expelled* from their country for grave offences against country laws; and this would account for the fact of their having lost all trace of their original name. This latter circumstance is noticed by Dr. Koëlle; but, from his not having heard the legend connected with the subject, he was unable to do more than conjecture the circumstances which compelled the exodus. Mohammedanism is spreading fast amongst the Veyes; and teachers of that religion do not fail to meet with the greatest respect and consideration amongst them; whilst a singular tradition is current that they formerly belonged to that creed, and that sooner or later they will all embrace the faith of the Koran again.

## LEGEND OF THE VEY IMMIGRATION.

“I speak of a long time past, hear. It is written in our old-time-palaver-books—I do not say *then*, in old time the Vey people had no book, but the old men told it to their children and they kept it; afterwards it was written. In that time

there was a country a long way to the East, where the Mani people lived, a country far, very far, away in the bush, over which a king reigned, who had two sons, called Faibule and Kiatambah. Now, although this country was far in the bush, the people were not like the rest of bushmen. They had fine towns like the Mandingoes, and to describe their towns they had a book also—the same book as the Mandingo nation. And all the time the people took the law of this book. But the people round them neither had a book nor any proper law; they went always in the bush to talk devil-palaver, and did sacrifices which were not liked by people who take the law of Mussa. So when the two sons of the king had grown up, their father took them aside one day as they walked amongst the rice, and made them swear never to be led away from the ancient faith of their people, and never on any account to consent to worship the devil or to go into the bush with the surrounding tribes for the purpose of any religious rites. Further, it was told to all the towns, at the beating of the great tamanden (war-drum), that death would be the certain punishment of any such departure from the law of their tribe. Now the bush people were very fond of play, and their women were both handsome and well grown, and the words of the old king did not deter the two young men from being seduced away, for they soon forgot everything but how to please the devil-women they had for wives. When the ill news came to the old king, his heart stood up in him, for the law was very strong with our tribe, and the young men were his own sons—their mother still lived in his house. And for her sake, and the intercession of some chief men, for the young men's good news had gone to many towns, he would not kill them; but he said: 'Go now; you have done those things which to our people are an abomination, and for which death may well be the punishment, but, remembering that you are our sons, and that your mother still lives, I send you away instead. Take therefore, my children, the slaves, the women, the goats, and the rice, that belongs to you, and to which I will add what shall be necessary, and go out from our people. Never shall your feet make tracks on our farms again, nor your mat be spread in our houses. Go, find some country where you can sit down, you and your people. Hear! I have done.' So the two called together their wives and slaves, their cattle and rice, and they got up from their country as their father had said. At this time the rice-farms had been planted one moon. And the two men and all their people walked the bush and could find no place to sit down. At last they came to the sea below here (Little Cape Mount River?); but the people were very hard, and would not let them sit

down. So they walked along the beach until they came beyond the mountains, and saw how fine the country was—for the rice was now nearly ready to cut. They sent to the head men of the country, and said to them: 'We have walked past eight moons and have found no place to sit down; give us, therefore, some place where we can spread our mats and we will be your friends; but, if you are unwilling to give us as friends that which we ask, we will take it by force, for some of our women can go no further.' But the tribe in whose country they had arrived would not hear them, so they sat down on the beach, determined to take the country for themselves as soon as all their people had come up.

"So Faibule and Kiatamba fought with their people against the inhabitants of this new country, killing a great many. Now it happened that at this time there were many palm-trees at Toso, and the warriors of the invaders went there to drink palm-wine. And one day Kiatambah wanted to drink, and, coming to the tree, saw in his path the coat (*i.e.*, skin) of an alligator, which he took home for his children. When he did so, the alligator was walking about to find something to eat, and so did not see that his coat had been stolen by Kiatambah; but one of the slaves of Zung,\* who had hidden himself for fear close by, saw all that had happened, and when the alligator returned, informed him who had stolen his coat, and promised to get it back again for him. This was very good to the heart of the alligator, who, in return for the kindness, told the slave to go to his father and tell him he had some news to tell him which would be of great benefit to him and all the tribe. So the next day King Zung and his chiefs went out to hear from the mouth of the alligator, who, when they had found him, spoke these words: 'The people who come to fight you and take your country are too strong; before the next rice is cut, yourselves and women will all have been killed or made slaves of. Now, therefore, listen to my advice; and, because one of your people has recovered my coat for me, I will show you a way that you shall all escape the death that already is close at the house of every one.' The alligator then took them all to the margin of the lake, by Datea, where a large vine hung over into the water, and showed them how, by means of this vine, they could all descend to a beautiful town under the water. So they all went down, the king and his people with all their children, to the homes of spirits, where they sing and dance all the time. And sometimes when we pass our canoes that way, and the night is quiet, we hear

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\* The king of the place.

the noise of their playing; but no man looks over the side of the canoe, but in perfect silence we pull quickly past. If any one looks into the water, he will see the tops of the houses, and the spirits will call him so that he will be obliged to go.

"And because the alligator did this thing, we do not like to kill or trouble them."†

With regard to the period at which this emigration took place, I can have but a rough means of guessing, the Veys themselves being very inaccurate in the matter of dates which go back much beyond two generations. I should, however, be inclined to think that the period of their exodus might be quoted at between two and two and a half centuries ago. The period which they are described in the legend as having occupied in journeying from the Manies country to the one which they at present occupy—viz., about eight lunar months—may easily be accounted for, as, by their own story, the brothers started in a southerly direction until they came to the coast, when they changed their course to about north-west, and finally, nearly due north along the beach. African locomotion, moreover, is none of the speediest; besides which, their march must have been encumbered with women and young children.

This legend was told me by an old chief living at Mando, a town of the Veys, to whom I paid a visit of a few days. I have endeavoured to preserve as much as is possible in a translation the characteristic expressions of the country, with the exception that I have given the narrative uninterrupted by my frequent questions.

In physical appearance, the Veys are tall and well proportioned, generally stouter in build than the Mandingos or Temenes. Their features are regular, possessing none of the hideous grossness of the traditional "nigger", though somewhat more broad than those of the two great families above-named. I think the character given to them by some of the missionaries by no means deserved. They have characterised the women as "unchaste and shameless", the men as with "no other god than their belly". Against such a sweeping condemnation I must enter a most decided protest; and, as my experience was acquired by the closest daily intercourse with them in their native towns, I might be permitted to do so without presumption. That Vey ethics essentially differ from those of Europe I cannot deny, nor do I wish to infer that there are not many blackguards to be found here, as in every other country under the

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\* At some towns I visited the alligator was held almost sacred; and a tame one was permitted to come into the town, without molestation, to look for food, with which it was regularly supplied.

sun ; but what I do affirm is, that they will not only compare favourably with neighbouring tribes, both as to their mental and social condition, but would completely put to the blush most of the foreign settlements on the west coast, who have had the benefits (?) of civilisation. The Vey character is eminently light and buoyant. Dancing and playing are frequently kept up all night long during fine moonlight nights. The missionaries seem to be always looking at the subjects of their labours through the large end of a telescope, by which means they get a very distorted image—very small, and far off, and out of proportion ; whereas, viewed with the actual eye, they are, after all, not so very far different from the old original stock as to be unrecognisable as members of one great family. Perhaps the sympathy and kindness I so frequently experienced from them has made me a partial chronicler ; but am I to blame if the exhibition of an affectionate solicitude and kindly feelings claim the tribute of my good report ? Such acts and feelings belong to no creed, colour, or country, but are inherent in the large-hearted of all times and regions. What willing hands tended me in many hours of sickness—fanned my fevered cheek, or applied the coldest water to my heated brow ! How untiring were those nimble feet, which day after day scoured the bush in search of the most famous “ medicines ” ! And shall I forget the voice that chanted for my amusement the songs of Hurah, soft and musical to a sick man’s ear, for they told of kindness and sympathy ?

Although, like all African tribes, the Vey people are superstitious, they compare favourably in this respect with most other Africans I have been amongst. Gregees are an institution with old and young, freemen and slaves, and are worn for all sorts of purposes. In war times particularly, the important leaders may be seen almost loaded with charms of different kinds and degrees of virtue. But I am inclined to believe that the best of them place very little real faith in their efficacy. On one occasion I remarked to a great leader, “ Why do you wear all these charms and medicine ? You surely do not believe that they can save you either from gun-shot or sword-cut.” “ Well,” said he, “ but they make our men more fearless, as most of them place implicit confidence in war medicine ; and we do all we can to encourage such a belief.” A painful example of how far a belief in the bodily appearance of his satanic majesty acts on the nervous system is to be found in the fact that persons are occasionally found suffering from a very violent and distressing species of fit, concerning which it is impossible to get any information further than that the patient has seen “ the devil ” ! In the cases of women, who are

most liable to these diabolic attacks, the devil is of the male sex ; but the male sex are visited, according to native report, by a demon of the opposite sex ! I once witnessed a very bad case of this kind of possession. It was in the person of a young married woman, at the time in a condition to be more easily affected through the medium of the imagination. However this may be, there was no doubt but that the attack was severe, and might, in her condition, have proved dangerous, if her friends had not been in the way to take charge of her. There is a wild staring of the eyes, though apparently without the power of distinguishing objects ; low moaning, interrupted by frequent and loud shrieking. If patients were not restrained by a considerable amount of force, they would do themselves and others injury by their violent contortions. When the patient came to herself, she appeared perfectly well again, though exhibiting signs of great fatigue. Her sister accounted for the attack by stating that she had that evening *washed after sunset*, contrary to her advice. This, it seems, is a fruitful source of such attacks, or at least is reported to be so. The friends of the patient endeavour to make her tell the name of the devil by whom she is possessed ; for, as soon as she is sufficiently conscious to do so, he will immediately go out. Now, I do not pretend to explain the scientific nature of this species of malady ; nor can I assign a reason for the supposition entertained by the natives that the devil has any hand in it, except, indeed, the general one, that savage tribes often ascribe to supernatural agencies phenomena which they are unable to account for in their philosophy. They are very careful of young children, lest they should become the objects of witch malice ; and it is the custom for women who are about to be confined to dress very plainly, in order not to excite the ill nature of those “bad people”.

Foretelling future events is believed in to a great extent ; and professors of the art, who are usually Mohamedans from the north, are invariably consulted before any important step is taken. “Cutting sand”, as it is termed, is the most common mode. Professors of the occult sciences will also guarantee to provide you with “medicine” either to render yourself invisible, or put others into a profound sleep, or render you invulnerable. Tricks of sleight of hand are sometimes played, but I saw nothing that would compare to Indian feats of this kind. The most clever was the drinking of a twenty-four gallon cask of palm-oil, and its subsequent ejection again. How the deception was practised I could not detect. They firmly believe in some persons who, they say, can kill you in a second by their mere volition. There is a dangerous rock in the Mafa river,

which is never passed without giving a tribute, either a leaf of tobacco, a handful of rice, or drink of rum, as a peace-offering to the spirit of the flood.

Vey notions of religion, if indeed we might dignify such crude ideas by that name, are of the most vague and shadowy kind. They generally believe in the existence of a God of some kind or another, but hardly can give you an explanation, further than that, when they die, they will all go to his country. Of the dangers of taking another route they have no fear, since Vey divinity seems to ignore that side of the question altogether, except those who have imbibed the belief of the Koran.

They believe that any and every prayer to the Supreme Being will always be answered, whether its objects be good or bad; for example, if a man says, "God send me a dark night to roll this stone," they believe that it will be sent; and if the owner of the stone says, "God, make me know who has robbed me," his prayer will also be answered. They have the idea that the bad man's prayer will be answered as readily and fully as the good man's.

A few of the chief men of the country profess Mahommedanism, but for the most part it is kept in a very loose way. On one occasion I had the following conversation with an old warrior on the subject of religion.

I.—"Why do Vey people take the law of Mussa; they do not know the Mandingo book; why, therefore, do they not take the white man's book, as you all believe it is the best one?"

Finiamo.—"You talk true; we do not know the Mandingo's book very well, but they come to our towns and make 'medicine' for us, and tell us of their book, which the white men do not; and it is very hard to learn a new book. But our children's children will certainly all have your book."

I.—"But how is it that you, who have good sense, do not leave the Mandingo's and take our law?"

Finiamo.—"Well, you see, the Mandingo book-man tells us that if we do not take their law when we die we shall all go to hell (dsahannamâ). Now I am old, and if I begin to learn a new religion at my time of life, I may die before I have learned enough of your book; and having rejected that of the Mandingo, in that case I should certainly go to hell, as I should have no book at all!"

The Mandingo is usually the schoolmaster, as he is also the priest; but it appears to me that his ministrations in either office are not so effective as could be wished. The slaves are as a rule far more ignorant, and therefore infinitely more superstitious than the free people, a state which we should more



justly describe as their misfortune rather than their fault, as they are generally kept hard at work in the farms. The following curious specimen will serve as an example :—

We arrived at a Vey half-town late at night during the continuance of a tornado which had commenced shortly before. We were surprised to hear, above the din and crash of the elements, the voice of the natives calling out at the top of their voices some words in the Gola tongue. On approaching nearer the habitations we could distinguish the words, which were translated to the following effect :—

“ We did not do it.”—“ We never did anything wicked.”—“ It was that other man who lives a long way off,” etc., etc. This cry was kept up till the tornado had passed over. It was evident that they believed the storm was sent to punish them for some delinquency, and that they could induce its removal by lying.

Places for teaching, or the worship of the Koran, are not common, being found only in a few of the larger and more important towns. I was on one occasion present at the mosque,—for the African Mohamedans of the west coast are by no means so exclusive as most of their creed,—and was much amused at what I suppose must be called a sermon, preached by a Mohamedan professor. The whole discourse took a very practical turn, inculcating rules of forbearance and politeness in all relations of life. But what was most strange was, that some of the congregation would frequently interrupt the preacher, by asking questions on points which they did not quite comprehend,—a system which appeared to be quite correct and usual. The teacher was remarking on the disagreeable way that many creditors had of asking for their debts,—perhaps learnt by experience ; when one of the hearers interrupted him with the question, “ But, is it wrong for a man to collect that which is due to him ? ” “ Certainly not,” said the preacher ; “ but he should go to his debtor softly and ask him to pay, and if he could not do so, he was to wait a reasonable time to enable him to collect funds for the purpose, and not to sell or take in pawn his slaves or children.” I thought this rather a dangerous theory. Vey ethics are not particularly strict in this matter of debt-paying.